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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CHIANG MAI 000192

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SUBJECT: OPPONENTS TAKE AIM AT PRO-THAKSIN FRONT-RUNNER

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 185 (NORTHERN VILLAGERS)

- [1](#)B. BANGKOK 6007 (FRAUD, ARMY INTERFERENCE)
- [1](#)C. BANGKOK 5914 (THAILAND ELECTION ROUNDUP)
- [1](#)D. CHIANG MAI 182 (THAKSIN LOYALISTS POISED TO RECAPTURE NORTH)
- [1](#)E. BANGKOK 5749 (ELECTION PLAYBILL)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Michael Morrow, Consul General, Chiang Mai, DoS.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (SBU) Competing political parties are trying to make inroads in northern Thailand, a stronghold of former Prime Minister Thaksin and the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party (PPP). The opposing parties believe PPP, lacking the advantages of incumbency and under close scrutiny by election authorities to prevent vote-buying and other campaign violations, can be taken down a notch in the December 23 elections. PPP's opponents have recruited heavily to put forward recognized candidates with previous experience in parliament. Nonetheless, strategists for PPP, as well as some rival politicians, continue to project that PPP will win at least as many northern seats as Thaksin's party did in 2001, though fewer than in 2005. Some recent analyses, however, forecast lower totals for PPP in the north. End Summary.

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PPP Opponents Take Aim  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) In recent weeks Consul General has spoken to several politicians from parties opposing the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party about their strategies for taking on the front-runner in its northern Thailand stronghold. Most are counting on election and military authorities to crack-down on past free-wheeling vote-buying by the Thaksin camp (while largely allowing the

competition to have a free hand). They also believe PPP prospects will be limited since it lacks the advantage of incumbency enjoyed by its antecedent party, Thai Rak Thai (TRT), in 2005.

13. (SBU) PPP's rivals, while largely parroting the party's populist economic platform, are also pitching the need to empower consumers (through greater savings and earnings) rather than merely feeding them handouts. In addition, PPP rivals in the north are studiously avoiding an anti-Thaksin tinged message out of deference to the native son's widespread popularity here.

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Counting on Authorities to Tilt the Playing Field  
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14. (C) A Chiang Mai-based former parliamentarian and candidate for the Democrat Party, widely seen as PPP's strongest rival, told us that TRT bought its way to victory in the last two elections. But now the Royal Thai Army (RTA) intelligence is all over the PPP; it knows and monitors every money man and will block or arrest them to prevent vote-buying. Conversely, he said, the authorities will allow rival parties to have a free hand. Without vote-buying, he claimed, PPP will lose half the voters TRT once had.

15. (C) Other sources were more cautious. A first-time candidate for Motherland (Puea Paendin), a recently formed party that has shown momentum nationally, said PPP is still the wealthiest party. Personally he has seen little military presence at campaign events in his Chiang Mai district. He expressed doubt about the RTA's and military-appointed government's ability to effectively control illegal campaign spending in the countryside. Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) officials in Lampang speculated that most vote-buying that may have taken place likely happened before the new election laws entered into force on October 8. They also spoke of a new vote-buying method reported in other provinces - party canvassers purchasing life insurance cards for voters. In

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Lampang, the ECT has received a number of anonymous tips on vote-buying, but upon investigation it could confirm none of these. No local candidate has yet lodged a spending complaint.

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Lack of Incumbency Deprives PPP of Old Levers  
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16. (C) Several sources pinned their hopes on the fact that the pro-Thaksin camp, ousted from government in the September 2006 military coup, now lacks the electoral advantage of incumbency. Our Motherland source said appointed regional and local officials, from governors down to sub-district heads, would be able to influence voters without being beholden to the PPP. Also, he claimed the ECT was in TRT's pocket in 2005 and thus looked the other way on electoral violations. But this time it would be strict. A Lampang-based former parliamentarian and Motherland candidate said the biggest difference between this election and last was that, in 2005, TRT had money and the advantage of incumbency, whereas this time "they (PPP) only have money." Yet she expressed concern that the ECT "lacked teeth" and doubted its ability to impact the race.

17. (C) Yet she admitted TRT's influence remained deep-rooted in the north, and that many police and other local officials appointed during the Thaksin era were still in place. Post is aware of one case where two such officials were recently "purged." A local journalist provided us with specifics on a television report of the transfer of two district (amper) assistant officers in Chiang Rai for being "partial" toward certain candidates. According to the journalist, both were closely linked to local PPP heavyweights. The governor transferred them to other duties for allegedly meeting with village and sub-district (tambon) heads to urge their support for PPP.

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Preaching Empowerment, Not Handouts  
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¶18. (C) Our Democrat Party (DP) source, when asked about strong public support for PPP's pledge to continue or restore the TRT government's populist economic programs (Ref A), scoffed that TRT "used" the people: instead of empowering them, it bought them off with populist handouts. DP campaigners are promising policies that will allow people to increase personal savings vice spending. For example, DP is calling for free public education that will remove the hidden costs of the current "free" public education, such as personal spending on school books, uniforms, meals, etc. DP also proposes changing the health care system to eliminate hidden costs there, too, especially for medications.

¶19. (C) Our Motherland source highlighted the economy as a key campaign issue, given steadily declining consumer confidence over the last year. As a Chiang Mai candidate, he is campaigning to broaden the province's economy beyond its current dual anchors - agriculture and tourism - both of which are vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations. Motherland is promoting the development of two additional anchors: a design/fashion sector, and a high-tech and medical research sector, both of which would build on Chiang Mai's strong university base. He is also advocating alternative energy policies that are attractive to northern farmers hurt by rising fuel prices. Another Motherland candidate (and former Chiang Mai-based parliamentarian) complained that TRT handouts were bad economic policies that just generated personal debt. She is campaigning to strengthen the economy's foundation so consumers can earn more and borrow less. This complements the King's sufficiency economic principle, she noted, which advocates against debt.

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Thaking It Easy on Thaksin  
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¶10. (C) Given former PM Thaksin's widespread popularity in his native north, PPP rivals here are steering clear of an anti-Thaksin message on the campaign trail. Motherland, in particular, is toeing the national party line of being an "alternative" for voters and not committing to either of the two leading parties (PPP and DP). Our three Motherland contacts emphasized they are campaigning as a "middle path" party that can bridge current political divisions. For one thing, Motherland fears it would be punished by northern voters if it

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were to openly side with the Democrats and against PPP. For another, they expect to garner more seats by holding the center, and thus boost their chances of joining a government that has as few coalition partners as possible. Despite their careful public balancing act, however, our Motherland sources expressed a greater comfort level with, and greater likelihood of, a partnership with the Democrats vice PPP. As they see it, any PPP-led government just a year after the anti-Thaksin coup is a recipe for uncertainty at best and instability at worst.

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PPP Candidates Remain Confident  
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¶11. (C) Despite being in the gunshots of rival parties and government and military authorities, PPP strategists are confident of their ability to retain a strong hold on the north. On November 30, Consul General met with two Chiang Rai-based former parliamentarians who are running for re-election under the PPP banner: the sister of PPP deputy leader Yongyuth Tiypairath, and PPP Deputy Spokesman Samart Kaewmeechai. They made the following points:

-- PPP is not worried about lacking the advantages of incumbency. It expects to win a plurality (or better) of seats

on the strength of its reputation and strong voter identification, its policy implementation track record (as the successor to TRT), popular support for Thaksin, and public dissatisfaction with the coup, the military-appointed government, and the economy. PPP is pitching December 23 as a referendum on democracy (PPP) versus the coup-backers (DP and most other parties) - a concept it believes is more important than any party's campaign platform or any individual candidate. (Note: Lampang ECT officials made the same point a week earlier: for most voters, election day boils down to "are you pro-Thaksin or pro-coup?").

-- Military attempts to intimidate voters against supporting PPP are backfiring. Our contacts reiterated complaints they had made in the press earlier in the week about RTA and police personnel intimidating PPP supporters (Ref B). However, they did not dwell on the issue or provide details, other than Samart's specific allegation that soldiers had surrounded the house of his campaign assistant to cow supporters into staying away from him. Despite their public protestations, Samart and Tiypairath said privately they believe the military's heavy-handed tactics only solidify the resolve of PPP supporters to get out and vote. (Note: A Chiang Mai-based "Bangkok Post" reporter known to have good military contacts told us the police and military are cracking down on vote-buying in Chiang Rai, which they fear is a transit point for cash flowing into PPP coffers from Laos and Burma. Police have been able to obtain court orders to search the homes of some PPP canvassers based on allegations of drug dealing - post cannot confirm whether these are trumped up or not. Also, soldiers are making their presence known in some villages and have taken photos of canvassers' houses. Other sources have told us that Chiang Rai is a target of RTG and RTA concern because of the firm political grip held there by powerful Thaksin confidant Yongyuth. End Note).

-- PPP is concerned about military activities in Chiang Rai's 3rd electoral district, which includes many hill tribe villages along the Burma border. PPP claims soldiers there have threatened to revoke or deny citizenship to hill tribesmen who vote for PPP.

-- Some military personnel (the "professional" ones), try to stay neutral and are apologetic when ordered to observe election events. Other soldiers, who actively backed the 2006 coup, are problematic.

-- PPP candidates need to scrupulously follow election campaign rules because the ECT is looking solely for PPP wrongdoing and ignoring the actions of rival parties.

-- PPP's biggest rival in Chiang Rai is the Chart Thai party, whose lead candidate owns a casino that he is using to buy votes by handing out free gambling chips.

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The Survey Says:  
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¶12. (C) PPP strategists, as well as some rival candidates,

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expect PPP to win at least as many northern seats as Thaksin's party did in 2001, though fewer than in 2005. Of the 77 constituency seats up for grabs in the northern region's 17 provinces, TRT captured 71 in 2005 and 55 in 2001. PPP Deputy Spokesman Samart projects his party to win "60 plus" this time (the same figure he gave us over a month ago). Motherland candidate Kingkarn Na Chiengmai, a two-time parliamentarian prior to 2001, agreed, telling us PPP was on track to win 60 to 65 northern seats, compared to five or six at most for her own party.

¶13. (SBU) Some recent analyses, however, forecast lower totals for PPP in the north. A "Daily News" survey among its reporters nationwide during November 25-28 projected just 37 seats for PPP in the north. And "The Nation" newspaper's latest weekly

analysis by its journalists, published December 3, forecasts 35 northern seats for PPP. (Comment: as Ref C notes, all poll statistics in Thailand should be considered with skepticism).

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Comment  
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¶14. (C) Taking on PPP in its northern stronghold is a challenging task under any circumstances. While we believe rival parties are getting favorable treatment from military and election authorities, most other factors conspire against the PPP's competitors: namely, loyalty to favorite son Thaksin, widespread support for TRT government policies, strong voter identification with the PPP and its candidates, declining consumer confidence, and a sense that the military coup plotters and their sympathizers should be punished (at the ballot box) for ousting a leader with whom most northern voters closely identified as someone who "gave back" to his supporters. Meanwhile, we continue to emphasize in our meetings with regional authorities and the public our belief that the elections should be free and fair, with participants able to compete on a level playing field.  
MORROW